

An Appraisal of "Timely Economic  
Information for Ohio Farmers"

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### Summary

1. Those who receive "Timely Economic Information for Ohio Farmers" are not "average" farmers. Generally, they operate farms larger than average, are older than average, have more than the average amount of formal education, and they participate in community activities more than the average farmer. This, and following statements are based on questionnaires returned in this survey.
2. Approximately 95 percent of those who receive the publication usually read it.
3. More than one-third of those receiving the publication read all articles and more than one-half read a majority of articles.
4. About three-fourths read the articles in detail while one-fourth may be classed as "skimmers."
5. Eighty percent use the publication either fairly often or very often.
6. Most farmers use the publication for three or four different purposes.
7. Those with post-college training and those who participate in a large number of local organizations use it most frequently and also use it more for public problems and general information than other members of these groups.
8. Those with a minimum of formal educational training use the publication for more different purposes than those with a maximum of formal educational training.
9. More people use the publication to keep up to date on general information and to keep informed on public problems than use it as an aid in making individual decisions.
10. More than one-half the readers use it as an aid in making certain individual management or marketing decisions.
11. Farmers use it as an aid for individual decisions to a greater extent than non-farmers. Farmers also use it for more different purposes than non-farmers.

12. Those over 25 years of age use it more frequently than those under 25.  
They also use it for more different purposes than those under 25.
13. Readers believe the publication is as easy or easier, to understand than farm papers.
14. Length of articles presently used in the publication is satisfactory.
15. The number of figures used is satisfactory. If the amount of figures used is changed, more, rather than less, should be used.
16. Use of tables and charts is satisfactory. However, because of age and educational characteristics of readers, consideration might be given to use of more tables and more charts.
17. More people prefer the text form of presentation than prefer either charts or tables.
18. Forty-one percent of the readers do not have a preference between the text, chart, and table form of presentation.
19. More than 90 percent read both the price table and the business trends table.
20. Seventy percent want the publication to make predictions about what is likely to happen while 25 percent want only facts on which to draw individual conclusions.
21. Sixty-eight percent prefer a discussion of prices and supplies of farm commodities while 14 percent prefer a discussion of public affairs.
22. Most readers believe information appearing in the publication is current.
23. Most readers prefer a brief discussion of a variety of subjects rather than a thorough discussion of a single subject in each issue.

## INTRODUCTION

"Timely Economic Information for Ohio Farmers" is published monthly by the Agricultural Extension Service at Ohio State University. Recently, a questionnaire was mailed to each person receiving the publication in 22 Ohio counties. Completed questionnaires were returned by more than 1450 readers, approximately one-third of those who received questionnaires.

The questionnaire was especially designed to help Agricultural Extension Service personnel and members of the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Ohio State University find out from readers of the publication how personnel at the University can do a better job of furnishing readers timely economic information. With this thought in mind it seemed very desirable to learn something about the following five points concerning the publication. (1) who receives it, (2) the extent to which it is read, (3) the use made of information in the publication, (4) something of its readability or ease with which it is read, and (5) the content or make-up of the publication.

### WHO RECEIVES "TIMELY ECONOMIC INFORMATION FOR OHIO FARMERS"?

Approximately 16,000 people receive the publication each month. The majority of those who receive it are farmers but approximately 10 percent are engaged in other occupations. Most of the others work with farmers and have an interest in agriculture. These include Agricultural Extension Service Personnel, Vocational Agriculture teachers and others who work with businesses associated with agriculture.

Many who receive the publication are not "average" farmers as this term is usually used. Reference is made to the size of farm, age, educational background, and the extent to which they participate in community activities.

Most operate farms which are larger than the average for the state and have many years experience on the farm. Relatively few are in the so called "young" farmer group. They also have a broader educational background than the average of all farmers. In addition, it seems likely that a majority belong to more local organizations and participate in community affairs to a greater extent than the "average" farmer.

What is the significance of the previous statements? Does it mean that personnel at the University are unintentionally writing for a special group? Does it mean that some are more interested in this type of information than others and as a result had their name placed on the mailing list to receive the publication? The answer is not definite but one thing appears to be certain. At least to a certain degree those who receive the publication represent a special group. University personnel responsible for the publication want to continue to make available information which is of value to all farmers and others who have an interest in agriculture. Whether there are significantly different interests within different groups of farmers is a question which must be constantly kept in mind at the University.

#### ELEMENT TO WHICH THE PUBLICATION IS READ?

Approximately 95 percent of those who returned questionnaires indicate they either always or usually read the publication. More than one-half indicate they always read it. These figures are applicable for most groups. That is, they are about the same for farmers and non-farmers, for large farmers and small farmers, and for people with a minimum of educational background as well as those with a maximum of educational background. Young farmers were less frequent readers than those in older groups.

The number of articles read represents another question. Approximately one-third read all articles and more than one-half read a majority of the articles. The survey also indicates that farmers read more articles than non-farmers, that older farmers read more than young farmers and that those with only a grade school education probably read more than those with more formal education. It also **appears** that those who belong to only one local organization read more than those who participate in several organizations.

Who reads the publication in detail and who "skims" through it? Are there "skimmers" or does everyone read it almost word for word? About three-fourths of those who returned questionnaires read it in detail. The remainder are "skimmers." Who are the "skimmers"? The proportion of "skimmers" seems to be higher in the non-farm group than in the farm group and in the young than the older group. It also seems to be higher in certain other groups. They are: (1) small farmers, (2) those who have finished college and (3) those who participate in a large number of local organizations.

A group analysis brings to light some differences between the groups who receive "Timely Economic Information for Ohio Farmers" and those who are its most careful readers. It was indicated previously that, generally speaking, people who receive the publication have more formal education and participate in more local ~~organi~~zations than the average farmer. It seems they are also its least careful readers. Does this mean that the least careful readers **make** very little use of the publication? This question will be examined in the following section.

#### WHO USES THE PUBLICATION?

Three points are of special interest relative to use made of the publication. They are: (1) the frequency with which it is used, (2) the purpose for which it is used, and (3) the number of different ways it is used.

Let us look first at the frequency with which the publication is used. Eighty percent say they use it fairly often or very often. Most are in the "fairly often" category. Another 15 percent are in a "not very often" category. Only one in 100 indicate they never use it. Those more than 25 years of age use the publication more often than those under 25. Also, it seems likely that those with some post-college training and those who participate in a large number of local organizations use the publication more often than members of other groups. Its frequency of use is not significantly different among members of other groups mentioned in preceding paragraphs.

For what purposes is "Timely Economic Information for Ohio Farmers" used? The survey indicates the publication is used for a variety of purposes. For example, slightly more than one-half use it to help them decide when to buy and sell farm products. About one-third use it to help them decide how many acres of each crop to plant. A few less than one-half use it to help them decide the number of livestock to keep and almost as many use it as a feeding practice aid. Approximately 90 percent use it in keeping up to date on general information while two-thirds use it to keep informed on public problems and one-fourth "just enjoys" reading it.

How does its use vary within the different groups we have previously discussed? Farmers under 25 years of age appear to use it less for individual decisions than those in the older groups. All age groups use it for general information and public problems in about the same ratio.



Within educational groups it is used progressively more for public problems and general information as we move from those who have only a grade school education to those who have had graduate training in college. On the other hand those with progressively more formal education use it less for making individual decisions such as when to buy and sell.

There is some difference between the way farmers and non-farmers use the publication. For the most part the non-farm group uses it for public problems and general information. Farmers operating farms over 50 acres in size seem to make more use of the publication than those on smaller farms. Farmers who participate in a large number of local organizations use it more for public problems than those who participate to a lesser degree in local activities.

There is no significant difference between the ways farm owners and farm tenants use the publication. Neither is there any difference between the way various livestock farmers use it. That is, hog farmers use it about like those who specialize in dairy or beef. There is some indication potato farmers use it more than farmers specializing in other crops to help them decide when to buy and sell farm products. This might be because potato production and prices vary greatly from year to year. If so, it may indicate that farmers who produce products which are subject to great variation in supply and demand use the publication more than those who produce crops which are less sensitive to changes in supply and demand.

How many different ways is the publication used? The "average" farmer uses the publication in about three or four different ways. Approximately 80 percent use it three or more ways and about 50 percent use it four or more ways.

Within the various groups farmers use it more ways than non-farmers, those with less formal educational training use it more ways than college graduates, and those in the older age groups use it more ways than those in the very young groups. No significant differences were evident within other groups.

## HOW READABLE IS THE PUBLICATION?

How easy is the publication to understand? How does it compare with other similar publications and farm papers? Almost three-fourths of those who returned questionnaires believe it is about the same as other publications. About one-fifth believe it is easier to understand. A very few think it is more difficult to understand.

A group analysis indicates that non-farmers, those under 25 years of age, and those who belong to a large number of organizations believe the publication may be somewhat easier to understand than other publications. There is some slight indication that those who finished college and those operating the larger farms believe it to be a little more difficult to understand than other publications.

Associated with the readability of the publication are questions concerned with the length of the articles which appear in the publication, length of sentences, number of statistics, tables, and charts used, and the ease with which various words are understood. Ninety percent expressed the opinion that present length of articles is satisfactory. A few readers believe the articles are too long and a few others believe they are too short. The same general statements can be made about length of sentences as about length of articles.

The amount of statistics or figures to use when writing an article has been a problem of great concern for those responsible for the publication. The use of a large number of figures is not an example of a personalized style of writing. Some believe the use of many figures results only in "dry" reading. Others are not concerned with "dry" reading but are interested mainly in a thorough and accurate presentation of the facts. This type of presentation requires the use of many figures. Most readers are fairly well satisfied with the present use of figures.

More than two-thirds indicate the number presently used is satisfactory. About eight percent believe too many, and 12 percent believe too few, figures are used. No significant differences were indicated within various groups for which an analysis was made.

The number of tables and charts to use in the publication represents another problem of some concern. It is a problem because of the same general reasons mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Approximately two-thirds believe the number of tables, and more than two-thirds believe the number of charts, presently used is satisfactory. The number who believe that more tables and charts should be used is about six percent greater than the number who believe fewer of each should be used. There is a tendency for those in the younger groups and those with more formal education to want more tables and charts in the publication. Those who participate in a large number of local organizations also desire more charts than those who participate in fewer organizations. Also, most people who use the publication "very often" always read the charts and tables.

#### IS THE CONTENT OF THE PUBLICATION SUITABLE?

Each issue of "Timely Economic Information" contains a farm price table or a business trends table and once in a while a miscellaneous table. It usually contains one or more charts. In addition, most space is devoted to text material dealing with a variety of subjects. Some articles are concerned with prices and supplies of farm commodities, others deal with public affairs, and still others with general information. Those responsible for the publication were interested in what readers thought of the general content of "Timely Economic Information" and some interesting information was obtained.

Which form of presentation is preferred-text, charts, or tables? Many readers did not have a definite preference as indicated by the fact that forty percent say it makes no difference. However, 31 percent prefer text, 13 percent prefer charts, and about five percent prefer tables. A few others prefer a variety of combinations. Some groups seem to prefer more charts and tables with less text material. These include those under 25 years of age, those with a maximum of formal educational training, members of a large number of local organizations, and farmers operating relatively small farms. More farmers who specialize in potatoes and, or, soybeans also seem to prefer charts and tables than farmers whose main crop interest is some other crop. It is of interest to note that about one-fourth of those who prefer tables and one-third who prefer charts class themselves as "skimmers" rather than careful readers.

Is the price table read? More than 90 percent say they read it. Farmers probably read it more often than non-farmers and those over 25 years of age probably read it more often than those under 25. Potato farmers seem to be slightly more price conscious than other crop specialists. In addition, it seems evident that the price table is read more often by those who are careful readers than it is by those who "skim" through the publication.

Is the business trends table read? About the same proportion of readers read the business trends table as read the price table. Groups mentioned in the preceding paragraph who read the price tables most often are also some of the same groups who read the business trends table most often. In addition, it appears that farmers operating the larger size farms and those who are members of several local organizations read this table more often than those on small farms and those who do not belong to many local organizations.

Are the charts read? A majority of readers read the charts. Almost 85 percent indicate they read them. Most frequent readers are the non-farmers, when compared with farmers, and those with the most formal educational training. Also, a high proportion of potato farmers "always" read the charts.

Should the publication make predictions on what is likely to happen or should it give only facts on which conclusions may be drawn? A summary of questionnaires indicates 70 percent want predictions and 25 percent want to draw their own conclusions. The remaining five percent either have no opinion or they want predictions plus the right to draw their own conclusions. It should be pointed out, however, that the questionnaire asked for only one answer. The proportion who want predictions is higher in the non-farm than in the farm group, in the age group over 25 than under 25, and in the group which finished college than in the group which did not finish college. Potato and soybean farmers are also more interested in predictions than are other crop specialists.

Should the publication briefly cover a variety of subjects, or thoroughly cover only one subject in each issue? In the past the general practice has been to briefly cover a variety of subjects in each issue. There have been only a few exceptions to this practice. Eighty-four percent indicate a desire for continuation of the predominant practice. There appears to be very little difference of opinion within the various groups previously mentioned concerning this question. Only those operating the smaller sized farms and the potato farmers indicate a preference for only one subject.

Which is of most interest - a discussion of public affairs or a discussion of prices and supplies of farm commodities? Most readers (68 percent) indicate a preference for a discussion of prices and supplies of farm commodities. Fourteen percent prefer a discussion of public affairs. Significant differences appear within several groups. Farmers, for example, show a decided preference for a discussion of prices and supplies of farm commodities while a higher proportion of non-farmers are interested in public affairs. Others showing a predominant interest in public affairs are those with a maximum of formal education and those on the smaller farms. The proportion of farm tenants interested in prices and supplies of farm commodities is greater than the proportion of farm owners interested in the same subject. Also a relatively high percentage of potato farmers are interested in the same subject.

Is the information which appears in "Timely Economic Information" current? Most readers believe the information is current. Actually, 23 percent say very current, 63 percent say fairly current, two percent say not very current, and 15 percent have no opinion. Within educational groups, those with a maximum of formal educational training believe information appearing in the publication is more current than those with less formal educational training.

